

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

AMERICA AS 'HYPERPOWER': THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY

LOREE K. SUTTON
COURSE 5601
STRATEGIC LOGIC
SEMINAR C

PROFESSOR
AMBASSADOR JAMES A. WILLIAMS

ADVISOR
COLONEL JOHN H. MCDONALD

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AMERICA AS ‘HYPERPOWER’: THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY

‘The world’s only superpower’. . . America as ‘hyperpower’. . . Political and business leaders, private citizens, the media, and allied nations have contributed to the extensive use of these terms when describing the role and status of the United States during the post-Cold War era. Twelve years and three Presidents later, our national leaders are still struggling to define our position in a world so many had hoped would finally be free from war. While President Bush 41’s prowess in building an international coalition to prevail against Iraqi aggression led to a record approval rating of 91%, his apparent indifference to the impact of the 1991-92 economic recession on the home front doomed his reelection hopes. Conversely, President Clinton, while achieving remarkable domestic success in ‘growing the economy’ throughout his two terms, was roundly criticized for excessive reliance upon multilateral engagement as the major principle governing his national security strategy. Departing from the practices of his post-Cold War predecessors, President Bush 43 initially assumed a unilateralist and even oppositional – ‘anything but Clinton’ – approach to foreign policy. And now, the events of September 11 have inexorably altered our national security environment. It remains to be seen – beyond the present crisis response efforts to build international consensus – how this catastrophe will alter the President’s approach to the international community during the remaining years of his tenure.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how America’s notional ‘hyperpower’ status represents both a potential threat and opportunity to our national interests as well as to identify how leaders and policy-makers can maximize the latter option. A review of America’s grizzled tradition of isolationism will provide a useful context for

understanding the roots of our recent – as of September 11 – mode of unilateralism as well as discerning critical differences and similarities that distinguish past from present, and now emerging, eras. Following a brief analysis of the nature and implications of these differences, an assessment of several recent foreign policies will correlate US unilateralist decisions with the responses of others – at home and abroad – and, accordingly, will weigh our actions based upon how they affect our ability to preserve our national interests. Finally, this paper will propose a set of recommendations to assist policy makers and leaders in sustaining our power and influence through the waning moments of the post-Cold War era to meeting the strategic challenges posed by this emerging era of terrorism, set in motion by the devastating attack on America.

Isolationism in America

From the beginning, waxing and waning tides of political influence best characterize America's history of isolationism. President Washington, in his farewell address, admonished our fledgling country to “steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world,” in his effort to influence the debate over our identity that continues to be waged today. For much of the 19th century, Washington's views prevailed due to our preoccupation with conquering the territory between our coasts. This endeavor was complicated by the eruption of the Civil War, which sought to resolve the conflict between our competing agrarian and mercantile interests. By the turn of the century, our involvement in the Spanish-American War and the Boxer Rebellion marked the beginning of the ‘Progressive Era,’ initiated by President McKinley but embodied most fully by President Theodore Roosevelt (TR), whose energetic internationalism was without precedent. With the Republican vote split

between President Taft and Progressive party candidate TR in 1912, President Wilson took office pledging that the United States would “never again seek one additional foot of territory by conquest.”¹ Ironically, Wilson’s repeated forays in Latin America and eventual crusade during World War I yielded a legacy of extensive military intervention and eventual rejection of his most prized hope – that the League of Nations would yield a universalistic peace rooted in American moral values. Further, as the Treaty of Versailles was neither draconian enough to eliminate Germany’s power nor generous enough to support its development as a democracy, hindsight discounts Wilson’s messianic vision as both naïve and dangerous.

Such insight, however, would not be evident during the following two decades, from 1920 to 1940, a period of conspicuous US isolationism marked by domestic pressure to retreat from the carnage of World War I and to put ‘America first.’ Economic lassitude prevailed during both the Harding and Coolidge administrations and contributed to the Great Depression faced by President Hoover, whose corporate genius proved no match for the nation’s greatest economic collapse to date. Three years into the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) rallied the nation’s confidence with his inaugural address, in which he asserted “that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”² An internationalist at heart, FDR chafed under the limits Congress placed upon his ability to respond to the increasingly grim news coming from Europe and Japan. Grasping America’s influential role in world affairs, he nonetheless prepared the country to accept its new global responsibilities and, when the ‘day of infamy’ struck, to exert its power and prevail over totalitarian aggression.

Assuming office upon FDR's death, President Truman thwarted domestic pressure to withdraw from the post-war world and instead pioneered numerous international efforts, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations, Marshall Plan, and NATO, through which America broke from its historic isolationist tradition to become the dominant military defender of the Western world. During the first two decades of the Cold War, America remained committed to JFK's inaugural conviction that we would "pay any price . . . to assure the survival and the success of liberty."³ Fifteen years later, disillusioned by defeat in Viet Nam and faced with growing cultural dissent at home, some questioned whether America was even worthy of its status as a world leader. Yet, under President Reagan's leadership, the country embarked upon a relentless course of military spending, diplomatic pressure, and menacing rhetoric aimed at toppling 'the evil empire' to end the Cold War in 1989. Distracted briefly by the blush of victory in the Gulf War, America assumed it would now reap its 'peace dividend' in return for its investment spanning over four decades of Cold War engagement. While President Clinton yearned for a Trumanesque legacy, the post-Cold War spasms of conflict and devastation – Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, Bosnia, Ireland, and the Middle East – seemed remote from the daily concerns of citizens and politicians alike who resented his penchant for notoriety on the international stage and rejected his brand of multilateralism.

Thus, the course of the past two centuries demonstrates an ongoing struggle within America to determine the extent to which it would engage in or distance itself from the outside world. With the exception of the Cold War period, during which our

national resolve stands out as an historical anomaly, the US has vacillated between regarding itself as “a retreat from the Old World or an example to it.”⁴

From Isolationism to Unilateralism

Enter President Bush 43, who earlier this year assumed the helm of a nation both divided over the legitimacy of his election and the question of America’s role in the world. Akin to the isolationist period beginning in the 1920’s, America has likewise been preoccupied with domestic concerns postponed during times of war and, in recent months, has encountered troubling signs of an economic slowdown puncturing a decade-long bubble of prosperity. Congressional leadership in both periods dismissed the possibility of war and, in the case of Kosovo, even voted against invoking the War Powers Act at a time, incredibly, when US pilots were receiving hostile fire.⁵ Unlike the interim period between World Wars, globalization of trade, communication, and culture has created a degree of interdependence among nations that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago. Further, transnational threats such as global climate change, cyber-warfare, illicit drug and weapons trafficking, and, as we now know all too well, deadly terrorism have altered the dynamics of geopolitical power in ways that we have yet to fully comprehend. Perhaps the most telling difference separating our role during these periods lies in the way we have viewed ourselves and, in turn, the way we have been viewed by others. As an example, the US in its prior isolationist phase defined its priorities by emphasizing ‘America first;’ subsequently, we shifted to defining our status by anointing ourselves as ‘the world’s only superpower,’ a phrase which surfaced shortly following the Gulf War and has persisted until earlier this year, when the term ‘hyperpower’ gained ascendancy.

The implications of this comparison are stark. Without doubt, the world has dramatically tilted towards a state of shared complexity and vulnerability, thus leading to heightened risk for all and supporting a need for sustained global US engagement. And, drawing from Bush 43's Inaugural Address, one might have presumed that the new Administration would act accordingly:

The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom. We will defend our allies and our interests. We will show purpose without arrogance. We will meet aggression and bad faith with resolve and strength. And to all nations, we will speak for the values that gave our nation birth.⁶

Given the new President's reputation in his home state of Texas, where as Governor he shunned ideological excess in favor of bipartisan pragmatism, many expected Bush 43 to capitalize on his affable nature to forge strong relationships at home and abroad. While efforts at wooing the leaders of Russia and Mexico stand out as notable exceptions, his Administration's pattern of 'going it alone' in foreign policy has repeatedly struck a discordant chord with allies and enemies alike.⁷ Thus far rejecting multilateral agreements on numerous topics, including global climate change, small arms control, germ warfare, and race relations, Bush 43 has demonstrated a strong tendency towards unilateralism, at times bordering on isolationism, as with national missile defense and the Middle East, in world affairs. This unilateralist trend, however, is not rooted in the current Administration but, rather, may be traced to the early post-Cold War years when Clinton repeatedly failed in his efforts to gain Congressional support on issues accompanied by a strong international consensus, such as the Helms-Burton Act, landmine restrictions, international criminal justice, UN dues, and nuclear

testing. Thus, perhaps it should come as no surprise that world opinion towards the United States – dubbed ‘hyperpower’ this past year – reflects considerable doubt about US reliability in the realm of international affairs.⁸ Interestingly, US political leaders and media luminaries have readily adopted this term with no apparent recognition of its pejorative tone and literal meaning, which convey the notion that the US wields excessive power.

Impact of Unilateralism

Unilateral actions preceding emergence of the ‘hyperpower’ label are numerous; US rationale for rejecting numerous international initiatives in recent months varies by issue. On global climate warming, for example, the President stated that the international consensus is based upon “unclear science”⁹ and that the economic burden is too high to warrant US participation. When told that the US refusal would set back world progress on environmental issues at least ten years, Condoleezza Rice, National Security Council Advisor to the President, replied that this was “one more reason” to delay.¹⁰ During the recent UN conference on illicit small arms trade, the US refused to negotiate, citing the need to protect our Second Amendment constitutional rights. Regarding germ warfare, the US pulled out of protocol negotiations in violation of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, ratified by the US in 1975, objecting that the inspection regime could not detect illegal production but would threaten proprietary business information. Most recently, the US withdrew from participation in the UN conference on racism, due to its emphasis upon Israel as an alleged perpetrator of Zionist racism.¹¹

Further, the US withdrawal of support from the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1999 and current willingness to dismantle the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in support of pursuing national missile defense have caused some to question whether America is still interested in multilateral arms control.¹² Complicating matters still further, US leadership in Kosovo exacted a higher price in world opinion than what we had anticipated.¹³ This may be particularly true with China, whose anticipated Security Council veto led NATO to shirk UN approval and to proceed waging its ‘war by committee’ on its own.¹⁴ One view holds that US action in Kosovo may have actually caused China to reconsider America’s motive in international affairs and to judge it as a revolutionary power intent on imposing its order on the world.¹⁵

Correlating responses with the above series of decisions yields a jarring cacophony of voices – allied and otherwise – signaling irritability at best and hostility at worst. From Japan, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Kuwait, Israel, Singapore, Ireland, France, Russia to China, international responses have questioned US motives and fueled anxious speculation regarding the prospects for a renewed arms race.¹⁶ Many of these failed multilateral agreements reflect the consensus of nations around the globe and were developed over a period of decades, thus stirring considerable resentment upon rejection, particularly since the US has yet to offer constructive input on what would be acceptable from its perspective.¹⁷ Further, failure to negotiate squanders the leadership role to others, who will be less likely to consider our opinions in the future. Ironically, by the end of the UN conference on racism, the final report contained virtually everything the US wanted, yet its delegation was conspicuous by its absence.

Domestic criticism, while a vital element of our political process, has likewise been exceptionally harsh and widespread with respect to US unilateralism. Reflecting this concern, a LEXIS-NEXIS search covering the past eight months identified over 600 magazine and journal articles addressing US unilateralism and isolationism, compared to only 17 written on this topic throughout the entire Reagan presidency – an imperfect comparison, to be sure, but perhaps a rough measure of the current degree of angst.¹⁸ Although Bush 43 is a self-described “internationalist,”¹⁹ few at home or abroad with agree with him on this point. In the words of Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Council Advisor to Bush 41:

So the world’s a pretty messy place right now, and there are signs that we’re getting a reputation as an arrogant and uncaring power. And if the Bush (43) Administration isn’t successful in reaching out and countering that impression, we’re going to find ourselves a very lonely superpower.²⁰

Recent actions reflect this growing chorus of international frustration. For example, the US recently was forced to withdraw its commitment to guarantee attack submarines to Taiwan when Germany and Netherlands, in whose countries the weapons are produced, refused to cooperate.²¹ In a dramatic and unexpected move, European allies supported China and Cuba in causing the US to lose its seat on the UN Commission on Human Rights for the first time in its history. In another surprising development, the EU launched a unilateral diplomatic mission to North Korea, a timely reminder that unilateralism works both ways. Further, China and Russia have recently signed a ‘friendship pact,’ the potential significance of which remains unclear. Recent articles and hallway whispers in the UN even refer to the US as a ‘rogue’ nation.²² Considering itself ‘indispensable,’ the US is also accused of behaving as though it were

‘exceptional,’ a dubious distinction marking America as a target for the world’s envy, scorn, rage and hatred.²³

Potential Threat

To be clear, the terrorists and their sources of support are responsible for their actions and must be held accountable for committing the unspeakable horrors of September 11. The question before us remains: how does our recent pattern of unilateralism affect our ability to preserve our national interests of freedom, prosperity, and democracy? All the more pressing in the wake of last week’s attack, this question is more complicated than it initially appears, raising even more questions. The talk of war somehow seems odd if not irrelevant – what punishment can be unleashed upon Afghanistan that the Taliban has not already inflicted? What can we compel from Bin Ladin that he is not already prepared to give in his cause for martyrdom? What does globalization offer to societies whose leaders refuse to participate, leaving their citizens with nothing to gain or lose? What responsibility should the US assume for the unintended consequences of both the global integration and disintegration it has unleashed? Given that deterrence, denial, and containment failed to prevent this attack, what can we realistically expect from the world of intelligence and covert operations in the future and what resources do they need to succeed? What constraints is the US willing to accept to maintain support from the international community? If we were to view us from the eyes of the world, how might that perspective alter our approach? What freedoms are we willing to relinquish to attain security? What is the threshold of liberty beyond which our national values shift to life, *security*, and the pursuit of happiness? What unintended consequences might follow indulging our appetite for

vengeance? What metaphor might shed light on the meaning of this new era and how we can best relate to it? How will our national leadership sustain public support for what at best may be viewed as a long 'twilight struggle?' And on goes the litany of questions, threatening to paralyze policy makers working under siege to find quick answers.

In the aftermath of last week's attack, there can be little doubt that the need for international cooperation is critical to achieving US success in our mounting struggle against terrorism. Most nations have responded with touching gestures of sympathy and support; many are also voicing concern that the US will retaliate by using excessive force. While America need not apologize for its strength and must always preserve its right to act unilaterally, it is an option that is most effective when exercised as a last resort.²⁴ Frequent insistence upon 'going it alone' risks a new brand of isolationism, one characterized less by withdrawal from foreign affairs and more by isolation from allies and councils of diplomacy.²⁵ Fueled by 'hyperpower' perceptions, recent international efforts to exclude the US from UN and other diplomatic efforts suggest a possible trend that, if unabated, would eventually threaten our ability to preserve our national interests.²⁶ Further, diplomatic efforts must seek to find common ground and to resist the attempts of others to goad us towards unilateral action. Failure to demonstrate solidarity with our allies will embolden rogue states and criminal elements to exploit this perception of weakness and to reinforce the cycle of terrorism.²⁷

America's Opportunity

On a brighter note, our current efforts to mobilize international action against terrorism represent a tremendous opportunity for America to counter the recent crescendo of negativity directed towards our role in foreign affairs and to exercise our unique responsibilities as the leader of the free world. The following set of recommendations will assist leaders and policy makers to maximize this opportunity within the strategic context for this emerging era of terrorism:

- Exploit the opportunity presented by the President's upcoming Address to the UN to define the US world role as an 'internationalist' and leader of the free world – dedicated to the ideals of democracy; committed to find common cause with other nations whenever possible; resigned to unilateral action when all other efforts fail; and opposed to isolationism in any form. As a tangible demonstration of US 'internationalist' resolve, the President should conclude his Address by announcing that he has authorized immediate payment for all outstanding UN dues
- Exercise US world responsibilities, including our response to the horrors of terrorism, using multidimensional, discreet, measured, cooperative and indirect means; in practical terms, this will require extensive collaboration with coalition members, both public and covert, and an attribution strategy that identifies contributors whose known support will stabilize Islamic and world opinion
- Transform US foreign aid initiatives into a long term global investment strategy that coordinates public and private sector contributions and features innovative partnerships drawing from the best from what the worlds of diplomacy, business, military, academia, philanthropy, and industry can offer; as with the Marshall Plan, sustained support will require Executive Branch leadership to elevate the level of open and continuous dialogue with Congress, American citizens, and the international community
- Develop a 'Futures Cell' component for the National Security Council to inform and guide strategic planning within the Executive Branch; this forum would provide a crucible for pondering the questions raised by the emerging reality of this new era and offer a range of strategic alternatives to serve as a catalyst for productive debate and coordinated action
- Provide rapid constructive US input regarding stalled international agreements on global climate change, nuclear testing, international criminal justice, illicit

small arms trade, and germ warfare; while all current agreements are admittedly flawed, the US must advance an agenda that would be acceptable from its perspective to reinvigorate debate and achieve international consensus, a timely imperative given the direct relevance of these issues to terrorism

Conclusion

In closing, the words of Winston Churchill following the Battle of Britain seem apropos as our country leads and joins the world in embarking upon the demanding journey ahead: This is not the end, nor is it the beginning of the end. But, perhaps it is the end of the beginning.

¹ James M. McPherson and David Rubel, ed., *To the Best of My Ability: The American Presidents*. New York: DK Publishing, 2000.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *London Times*, 12 September 2001.

⁵ *The National Journal*, 19 May 2001.

⁶ *President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address*. Obtained from the White House website: www.whitehouse.gov, 2001.

⁷ *National Review*, 11 June 2001.

⁸ *The Ottawa Citizen*, 30 August 2001.

⁹ *Time*, 10 September 2001.

¹⁰ *The Irish Times*, 25 August 2001.

¹¹ *The National Journal*, 14 April 2001.

¹² *The National Journal*, 19 May 2001.

¹³ Clark, Wesley K., *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo and the Future of Combat*. New York: Public Affairs, 2001, 355.

¹⁴ *The Economist*, 9 June 2001.

¹⁵ This information was gleaned from approximately 20 international newspaper articles published during April to September 2001.

¹⁶ *The Irish Times*, 25 August 2001.

¹⁷ These findings were obtained from LEXIS-NEXIS using key words of unilateralism and isolationism and Bush (inclusive dates: 20 JAN 01 through 1 SEP 01); unilateralism and isolationism and Reagan (inclusive dates: 20 JAN 81 through 20 JAN 89).

¹⁸ *The National Journal*, 19 May 2001.

¹⁹ *The New York Times*, 1 July 2001.

²⁰ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 8 September 2001.

²¹ *The National Journal*, 19 May 2001.

²² *The Washington Post*, 5 July 2001.

²³ *Foreign Affairs*, 19 May 2001.

²⁴ *The Washington Post*, 5 July 2001.

²⁵ *The Boston Globe*, 20 August 2001.

²⁶ *Financial Times* (London), 16 January 2001.

²⁷ *The Washington Post*, 5 July 2001.
